THE HORRID POPISH PLOT

1678 - 1681

An exhibition held 300 years after its advent
at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library

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> The Popish Plot: an incident, which, for the credit of the nation, it were better to bury in eternal oblivion: but which it is necessary to perpetuate, as well to maintain the truth of history, as to warn, if possible, their posterity and all mankind, never again to fall into so shameful, and so barbarous a delusion.
>
> (Hume)

England, during the hot summer of 1678, seemed to be peaceful. There were no outward signs of the volcanic emotions so soon to erupt with the revelations of Titus Oates and his associates.

The political climate was unstable. King Charles II, at loggerheads with Parliament, was chronically short of money, in part due to extravagance and mismanagement, but in part a legacy from his father, Charles I, and the Commonwealth which followed the civil war of 1642-1649. The financial policies of the Lord Treasurer, Thomas Osborne, Earl of Danby, had done much to repair the situation but also incurred the enmity of the increasingly strong opposition led by the Earl of Shaftesbury, whose headquarters were at the Green Ribbon Club. Rumours about the King's intrigues with the powerful, Catholic King of France, Louis XIV, added to the persistent fear of popery, a fear that dated from the persecution of the Protestants under Queen Mary, and was supported by a belief that Catholics, and in particular, the Jesuits, were behind previous attempts to undermine the government and were responsible for the great fire of 1666 as well as many smaller fires. Catholicism, in fact, came to be identified with absolute monarchy or arbitrary government as evidenced by the example of Louis XIV (cf. Marvell's <u>An account of the growth of popery</u> in Case 1). The situation was further complicated by the conversion to Catholicism of the heir to the throne, James, Duke of York, which brought to a head the anti-Catholic sentiments in the country. An obstinate and undiplomatic man, it was he who, in a sense, pushed the Popish Plot into being by insisting on the inquiry into it, while the King, with his superior statesmanship, was content to let events take their course and play a waiting game. The agitation for the exclusion of James from the throne was a direct result of the furor over the Plot.

The bomb set by Titus Oates was slow to explode although the government could not afford to ignore the stirring tale of a plot to assassinate the King and institute the Catholic religion. Not only were the Jesuits, led by the Provincial, Thomas Whitbread, implicated but also Louis XIV's confessor, Père La Chaise, who was accused of contributing money to the cause. There were vague statements about uprisings in various parts of the country.

Abortive attempts to assassinate Charles had led to a Grand Consult held in London on April 24th at the White Horse Tavern, to concert the plans of action at which Oates claimed to have been present. What gave credibility to the whole story was the eyewitness account and the details of names and places. Yet the whole affair might have come to nothing had it not been for two fortuitous happenings: the discovery of Edward Coleman's letters and the murder of Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey.

Was there any truth in the tale of murder and sedition? There are two main hurdles to belief: firstly, the eagerness of the conspirators, at first sight, to confide in and use as a messenger, so unprepossessing a character as Titus Oates, and secondly, the fact that not one of the accused, whether priest or layman, confessed to any knowledge of the Plot, even to save themselves from a hideous death.

The playing cards shown throughout this exhibition are copies of those in the library of Samuel Pepys.
The numbers in the text correspond to the items displayed in the cases.

CASE 1 "THE SAVIOUR OF THE NATION"

At the age of 29, Titus Oates was destitute and desperate. Distinguished only in "sanctimoniousness, indecency and perjury", his career had been ignominious in the extreme. Expelled in turn from school and university and dismissed under dubious circumstances from a Church of England living, a chaplaincy in the navy and as Protestant chaplain in the household of the Catholic Earl of Norwich, he turned as a last resort to the Society of Jesus. Claiming to be a convert, he prevailed upon the then Provincial, Richard Strange, to send him to the English College at Valladolid with a view to entering the novitiate. Quickly sent away because he knew neither Latin nor Spanish in which languages all lectures were given, he yet acquired one asset - he claimed to have been admitted doctor of divinity at the nearby University of Salamanca though five years later this was indignantly denied by the authorities there. For some reason unknown, an undeterred Strange gave Oates an introduction to the English College at St. Omers in northern France, a boarding school for boys from Catholic families, where he must have been completely out of place. Six months later he was dismissed by the new Provincial, Thomas Whitbread, as unfit for the religious life. It was during this period that he said he attended the Grand Consult in London. All these experiences stood him in good stead as he later claimed to have gone among the Catholics as a spy and anyone unfortunate enough to have annoyed him was inadvertently involved in the conspiracy.

Back in London with no resources, Oates fell in with an old acquaintance, Ezerel Tonge, a fanatical discoverer of and believer in Jesuit plots. (2) Together they worked out and launched that great hoax, the Popish Plot.

This then was the man who, in July 1678, with Ezerel Tonge, approached the King through the medium of the amateur chemist, Christopher Kirkby, and warned him of a plot against his life. As the details became known Charles's scepticism grew: two Jesuits, Pickering and Grove, were to shoot him, four Irish ruffians to stab him, and Sir George Wakeman, the Queen's physician, to poison him. For six weeks the plot hung fire as the Earl of Danby endeavoured to sift through the forty-three, later increased to eighty-one, articles of Oates's Narrative (3) while Oates himself remained in the background "remembering" further details, and providing a more or less daily journal of Catholic machinations. Tonge and Kirkby, meanwhile, genuine believers, continually pressed for action. On Danby's demanding concrete evidence, Oates sent forged letters purporting to be from leading Jesuits such as Whitbread, Fenwick and Ireland, confirming his story, to Bedingfield, the Duke of York's confessor, intending Danby to intercept them. However they arrived before they were expected and Bedingfield at once took them to the Duke, who, hitherto left in the dark, demanded an inquiry by the Privy Council. So obviously forged were these letters that they could not be used at the later trials.

On the 6th and 28th of September Oates swore to the truth of his evidence before the Justice of the Peace, Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey, and on the afternoon of the 28th he was called before the Privy Council. From now on he took the centre of the stage and Tonge and Kirkby faded gradually out.

The appearance of the Salamanca Doctor was not one to inspire confidence:

> He was a low man, of an ill-cut, very short neck; and his visage and features were most particular. His mouth was the center of his face; and a compass there would sweep his nose, forehead and chin within the perimeter ... (4)

but his prodigious memory and "unparalleled assurance" made a great impression on the bewildered members of the Council. Two days of intensive examination into Oates's assertions followed and although he had to confess that in spite of having seen so many documents and letters, he could not produce a single one, he promised to do so if he were allowed to arrest those involved and seize their papers. Permission having been granted he spent the ensuing two nights accompanied by a strong guard of soldiers, arresting the conspirators, his former benefactors and erstwhile friends. Now he had a stroke of luck. In Article forty-four of his Narrative he had referred briefly to Edward Coleman, secretary to the Duchess of York, and among Coleman's papers were found letters written some years before, which seemed to corroborate the whole Plot:

> We have here a mighty work upon our hands, no less than the conversion of three kingdoms, and by that perhaps the subduing of a pestilent heresie, which has domineered over great part of this northern world a long time ... (5)

An avid proselytizing Catholic, Coleman's letters to Louis XIV's confessor and others about restoring Catholicism to England, seemed to provide the missing proof. New arrests followed including that of the eminent Catholic barrister, Richard Langhorne.

Rumour was now running riot; there was no official announcement but everyone knew something was afoot and Lord Shaftesbury was considering how best to turn events to the Opposition's advantage when fate took a hand. The body of Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey was discovered in a ditch on Primrose Hill and the City exploded into panic.

Oates at last reaped the reward he felt was due to his position. Hailed as the Saviour of the Nation, he was being addressed in extravagant, if satiric terms, (6) and was in full possession of a pension of £600 per annum, a suite of apartments at Whitehall, and a guard to protect him from the Catholics.

(1) Andrew Marvell, 1621-1678. An account of the growth of popery, and arbitrary government in England. Amsterdam [i.e. London, 1678]

(2) Richard Greene, weaver. The popish massacre ... or, The IV. part of the present Popish Plot, farther discovered and demonstrated. Being part of Dr. Tonges collections on that subject ... London, 1679.

(3) Titus Oates, 1649-1705. A true narrative of the horrid Plot and conspiracy of the Popish party against the life of His sacred Majesty, the government, and the Protestant religion. London, 1679.

(4) Roger North, 1653-1734. Examen. London, 1740.

(5) Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons. Committee of Secrecy. A collection of letters and other writings, relating to the horrid Popish Plott. London, 1681.

(6) [Richard Duke] 1658-1711. A panegyrick upon Oates. [London, 1679?]

CASE 2 THE MURDER OF SIR EDMUND BERRY GODFREY

In his speech at the opening of Parliament on October 21st, 1678, the King briefly touched on:

> a design against my person, by the Jesuits, of which I shall forbear any opinion, lest I may seem to say too much or too little, but I will leave the matter to the law ... (1)

These last words became the keynote of his policy; but the lack of any real information about the Plot from the government made Parliament seize the initiative. The House of Commons set up two committees, one to consider means of providing for "the better preservation and safety of His Majesty's person", the other to investigate Godfrey's murder and the Plot. And Oates, appearing before the Commons, again added to his evidence. This time he told of a new Catholic army set up on the authority of the Pope, under the leadership of five Catholic peers, Lords Bellasis, Petre, Powis, Stafford and Arundell; they were at once committed to the Tower.

Meanwhile the hunt for the murderers of Godfrey continued unsuccessfully though public opinion blamed the Papists. The fact that in no way could the Catholics benefit from Godfrey's death was not considered. His murder merely confirmed belief in the existence of a Popish Plot and the words of Sir Thomas Player, the City Chamberlain, expressed the general feeling:

> I do not know, but, the next morning,
> we may all rise with our throats cut.

Godfrey's murder has never been solved though many theories have been advanced. There seems little doubt that it was murder but suicide is a possibility with some person unknown making it look like murder after his death. Godfrey was a man of melancholy and eccentric disposition and showed himself deeply worried after receiving Oates's sworn testimony. A staunch Protestant, he yet had many Catholic friends as evidenced by an unregarded warning to Coleman. He was renowned for his courage; during the plague he had not hesitated to arrest a thief taking refuge in a pest-house. More recently he had run afoul of the homicidal maniac, Philip Howard, Earl of Pembroke, when he was foreman of a jury that found the peer guilty of murder. When Pembroke was freed after pleading benefit of clergy on a charge of manslaughter in a trial before the House of Lords, Godfrey had thought it prudent to take a long holiday abroad. Godfrey was strangled and it was later discovered that at some point his chest had been badly bruised and he had been two days without food before he died. After death his own sword had been driven through his heart. (2) There is a possibility that Pembroke was responsible for his injuries which bore a certain resemblance to those inflicted on the earlier victim. (3) Whoever caused his death there was no doubt about its effect.

After lying in state for several days, Godfrey was at last taken to the grave with every possible display of pomp and solemnity. Seventy-two clergymen led an enormous procession and the funeral sermon was preached by William Lloyd, who, flanked by two stalwart curates, took as his text 2 Samuel III, 33-34: Died Abner as a fool dieth? (4)

At this point a new witness appeared on the scene. William Bedloe was a confidence trickster and robber. At first he claimed only to have seen the body of Godfrey at Somerset House, the residence of the Queen, in the presence of the murderers, two Jesuit fathers, Walsh and Le Fevre. Overnight he "remembered" more. "Surely", said the King, "the man has received a new lesson during the last twenty-four hours." Primed by the

Opposition leaders who were now hoping to attack James, he was able to act as second witness to the truth of the Plot. Oates was quick to pick up a hint. In his peculiar braying voice he announced at the bar of the House of Commons, "Aye, Taitus Oates, accause Caatharane, Quean of England, of Haigh Traison." Contrary to expectation, Charles was furious. Shaftesbury had expected him to jump at the chance to divorce Catherine and marry someone who could provide an heir to the throne. Oates, ordered to point out the anteroom where he overheard the Queen plotting with the Jesuits to murder the King, spent hours wandering unsuccessfully around the huge palace, and was then confined under guard to his Whitehall apartments and his papers taken from him. Although the Commons were quite ready to believe in the Queen's guilt, the Lords were not.

Bedloe's evidence failed to lead to any arrests until on December 21st he recognised a Catholic silversmith, Miles Prance, often employed by the Queen and by the Jesuits, as one of Godfrey's murderers. Prance was denounced by a lodger of his with a grudge against him, arrested and taken to the lobby of the House of Commons where Bedloe seized on the opportunity to prove his statements: "This is one of the rogues that I saw with a dark lanthorn about the body of Sir Edmund Godfrey, but he was then in a periwig!" Prance denied everything and was thrown, loaded with irons, into the coldest of Newgate cells, without fire, light or coverings. Two days later, on December 24th, he made a full confession (5) accusing three servants at Somerset House, Berry, Hill and Green, together with two Irish priests, Girald and Kelly, and placing the crime in an altogether different place in Somerset House to Bedloe's. The two priests were never discovered but Berry, Green and Hill, although undoubtedly innocent, were found guilty and, in February 1679, hanged. The conflicting evidence of Bedloe and Prance was dismissed as of no importance. "Upon the matter", said Chief Justice Scroggs, "you have two witnesses almost in everything." (6) Prance, meanwhile, retracted his evidence, was re-incarcerated in Newgate, and, nearly dead with cold, adhered to his original confession. In the reign of James II, he recanted again and blamed his perjury on the Earl of Shaftesbury.

(1) Great Britain. Sovereigns, etc., 1660-1685 (Charles II) His Majesties most gracious speech ... to both Houses of Parliament, on Munday the 21th of October, 1678. London, 1678.

(2) Gilbert Burnet, Bp. of Salisbury, 1643-1715. Bishop Burnet's History of his own time. Vol. 1. London, 1724.

(3) Thomas Salmon, 1679-1767. A new abridgement and critical review of the state trials, and impeachments for high-treason ... London, 1738.

(4) William Lloyd, 1627-1717. A sermon at the funeral of Sr Edmund-Berry Godfrey, one of His Majesties Justices of the Peace, who was barbarously murthered. London, 1678.

(5) Miles Prance. A true narrative and discovery of several very remarkable passages relating to the horrid Popish Plot. London, 1679.

(6) The Tryals of Robert Green, Henry Berry, & Lawrence Hill, for the murder of Sr. Edmond-Bury Godfrey. London, 1679.

CASE 3 OTHER INFORMERS

The success of Oates and Bedloe produced a rash of adventurers, all of dubious character and all eager to testify to the truth of the Plot. Collectively they were known as the King's Evidence.

The most impressive was Stephen Dugdale. Arrested as a notorious Catholic, he had been land steward to Lord Aston, a wealthy Staffordshire landowner, and his superior intelligence and sophistication made the Plot seem much more credible. He confirmed the existing "evidence" and further involved the five Catholic peers and especially Lord Stafford. (1) He accused William Ireland, the most distinguished of the English Jesuits after Whitbread, of masterminding the Plot, and introduced a new villain, Francis Evers, chaplain to Lord Aston. At this time it was not known that Dugdale had been dismissed for embezzling his master's rents so that his story of a sub-plot in Staffordshire involving the local Catholic gentry seemed very plausible. Although Oates and Bedloe had been careful not to incriminate James in the Plot, Dugdale was not so scrupulous: "Mr. Evers told me about July 78 the Duke of York had promised he would establish the Romish religion ..."

The evidence against Lord Stafford was confirmed by Edward Turbervill who claimed that Stafford had tried to enlist him to assassinate Charles. (2) That against Ireland was corroborated by Robert Jenison. (3) Both Turbervill and Jenison were quite ready to support the statements of the other informers as needed. (4)

The Catholics themselves were bitterly divided which did nothing to help their cause. This was made clear when John Sergeant, himself a Catholic priest but with a particular grudge against the Jesuits, came forward to give evidence against Father John Gavan. Gavan, a celebrated preacher, had died at Tyburn (see Case 4) but this did not prevent Sergeant from accusing him of having said that the Queen might lawfully kill the King for his unfaithfulness. He was supported by David Maurice. (5)

Meanwhile two informers who saw themselves as the Oates and Bedloe of the north, were busy uncovering a conspiracy in Yorkshire. Robert Bolron (6) and Lawrence Mowbray (7) centred it around the household of Sir Thomas Gascoigne, who, although 85, deaf, half-blind and lame, was arrested and brought to London to be tried for high treason. (8) He was acquitted by a jury brought specially from Yorkshire but his nephew, a priest named Thwing, was convicted and executed.

(1) Stephen Dugdale, 1640?-1683. The further information of Stephen Dugdale ... London, 1680.

(2) Edward Turbervill, d. 1681. The information of Edward Turbervill of Skerr in the county of Glamorgan. London, 1680.

(3) Charles Chetwind. A narrative of the depositions of Robert Jenison Esq; with other material evidences, plainly proving that Mr. William Ireland ... was in London the nineteenth of August, 1678 ... London, 1679.

(4) Robert Jenison, 1649-1688. The narrative of Robert Jenison, of Grays-Inn, Esquire. London, 1679.

(5) John Sergeant, 1622-1707. The informations of John Sergeant, and David Maurice, gentlemen, relating to the Popish-Plot. London, 1681.

(6) Robert Bolron, fl. 1674-1680. The narrative of Robert Bolron, of Shippon-Hall, gent., concerning the late horrid Popish Plot and conspiracy for the destruction of His Majesty and the Protestant religion. London, 1680.

(7) Lawrence Mowbray. The narrative of Lawrence Mowbray of Leeds, in the county of York, gent., concerning the bloody popish conspiarcy [sic] against the life of His sacred Majesty, the government, and the Protestant religion. London, 1680.

(8) The Tryal of Sr Tho. Gascoyne Bar. for high-treason, in conspiring the death of the King, the subversion of the government, and alteration of religion. London, 1680.

CASE 4 TRIALS FOR TREASON

A seventeenth century trial cannot be compared with a modern one. The prisoner in a trial for treason was at a disadvantage from the start. Kept in close confinement from the time of his arrest, he came into court knowing only the barest outline of the case against him. Already believed guilty by most men, he was not allowed a defence counsel without special favour and his own witnesses, if he was able to produce them, were treated with the utmost suspicion. He was, however, allowed to cross-examine the witnesses brought against him - if he had the ability. The only distinction recognised was between the evidence of an eyewitness to the actual crime and everything else.

The first trial of the Popish Plot grew out of the panic following Godfrey's death and Bedloe's evidence. Two scoundrels accused William Staley, the young son of a Catholic banker, of saying that the King was a rogue and a heretic and, if no one else stabbed him, he would. (1) He was summarily arrested, tried and executed.

One day after Staley's execution on November 26th, 1678, began the first of the great Plot trials, that of Edward Coleman, before Chief Justice William Scroggs. It was a test case as, if Coleman had been acquitted, the Plot itself would have collapsed, for upon his letters hung the weightiest evidence against the Roman Catholics. For the first time Titus Oates took the stand and gave Coleman a central place in the plan to assassinate the King. Immediately after the Grand Consult at the White Horse Tavern in April 1678, Coleman had given his approval at a smaller committee held at Wild House. Bedloe followed with much hearsay evidence. Coleman made a spirited attack on Oates asking why he had not accused him of all this at his first examination before the Privy Council. Oates protested that not only was the candlelight too dim to have recognised him clearly but that he was so weary after two sleepless nights making arrests that his memory had failed him. Coleman had little chance, however. As Mr. Justice Jones told the jury, "You must find the prisoner guilty, or bring in two persons perjured." (2) Five days later Coleman was hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn.

Although Oates had come close to being discredited, the verdict against Coleman restored faith in his veracity, and his liberty and papers were returned to him by the King's order. On December 17th the first of the Catholic priests, William Ireland, Thomas Pickering and John Grove, were brought to trial. Ireland brought witnesses to prove that he was away from London during the period Oates swore he was plotting the murder of the King. An attempt was made to bring up an old charge of perjury against Oates but Scroggs refused to let the copy of the indictment be read; "I do not think it authentick evidence", he said. The result was a foregone conclusion and Scroggs, in his summing-up, made a vicious attack upon the Catholics:

> They eat their God, they kill their King,
> and saint the murtherer. (3)

The execution of the three priests was held up by the King whose disbelief in the evidence of Oates and Bedloe was well known, but in the end all three died protesting their innocence to the last.

Six months later the trial of the five Jesuits, Whitbread, Fenwick, Gavan, Turner and Harcourt took place. All the old evidence was retold by Oates and Bedloe supported now by Dugdale and Prance. The defence hinged on whether or not Oates had been in London to attend the Consult in April. Sixteen witnesses, mostly boys from the school, were called to prove that he had not left St. Omers from December 1677 to June 1678 but, as they were all Catholics, their evidence was disbelieved, especially when they became muddled about dates and times. The five prisoners emphasized the unsatisfactory nature of Oates's evidence and Turner summed up their defence:

> All that I have to say, my Lord, is this, to ask whether it be reasonable that Bedloe and Oates should be looked upon as good witnesses, that these persons who have been such scandalous people should be admitted to an oath ... (4)

It was all to no avail. The jury was out for only fifteen minutes and returned a verdict of guilty.

The next day the dock was occupied by Richard Langhorne, the Catholic barrister who was the legal adviser of the Jesuits. He did his best to discredit Oates and Bedloe by attacking their characters and arguing that, as accomplices and as informers who had received rewards, they were not to be trusted. A doubt was sown in the mind of Scroggs about the reliability of the witnesses, when Bedloe swore that he had seen Langhorne transcribing treasonable letters at a desk in his chambers. It was later proved that this was impossible but meanwhile the dread sentence of hanging, drawing and quartering was pronounced upon Langhorne and the five Jesuits and duly carried out, though the last parts were performed upon their lifeless bodies. (5)

The trial of Sir George Wakeman, the Queen's physician, was of particular importance for, if he were convicted, so also would be the Queen. Three Benedictines, William Marshall, William Rumley and James Corker were tried with him and the trial began in the usual way with the reality of the Popish Plot being established. A new witness, Robert Jenison, appeared to disprove Ireland's alibi, and incidentally to show that Ireland had died with a lie in his mouth. Then Oates provided his circumstantial evidence of Wakeman's willingness to poison the King with the Queen's consent. And then came the turning point! Wakeman called upon Sir Philip Lloyd, clerk of the Privy Council, to state what Oates had charged Wakeman with at his first examination the September before. Oates had only, in fact, seen a letter in which it was written that Wakeman had undertaken to poison the King for £15,000. Wakeman had so vehemently denied this that Oates had been asked whether he could add anything more. He had answered, "No, God forbid that I should say anything more against Sir George Wakeman, for I know nothing more against him." Oates could only plead his old excuse of being too tired to remember more. This was too much, even for Scroggs:

> What, must we be amused with I know not what for being up but two nights? ... What, was Mr. Oates just so spent that he could not say I have seen a letter under Sir G. Wakeman's own hand. (6)

Wakeman and the three monks who were fortunate enough to be tried with him, were all acquitted.

The last of the great Plot trials was that of William Howard, Viscount Stafford. It opened on November 29th, 1680 before his fellow peers as jury and was the final effort of the Opposition to revive belief in the now flagging Popish Plot. The death of Bedloe in August of that year had left no strong second witness against the other four Catholic peers but against Stafford there was not only the testimony of Oates but of Dugdale and Turbervill as well. There was no written evidence whatever. Stafford was 69, infirm and unpopular but he defended himself with vigour. In a long speech he attacked the characters of his accusers. (7) However the circumstances were peculiar; a vote for Stafford seemed to favour the Duke

of York and popery and the final decision was 55 to 31 votes against him. The King commuted the usual sentence to one of beheading and Stafford was executed on December 29th.

(1) The Tryal of William Stayley, goldsmith, for speaking treasonable words against His most sacred Majesty. London, 1678.

(2) The Tryal of Edward Coleman, gent., for conspiring the death of the King, and the subversion of the government of England, and the Protestant religion. London, 1678.

(3) The Tryals of William Ireland, Thomas Pickering, and John Grove, for conspiring to murder the King. London, 1678.

(4) The Tryals and condemnation of Thomas White, alias Whitebread ... William Harcourt ... John Fenwick ... John Gavan ... and Anthony Turner, all Jesvits and priests, for high treason, in conspiring the death of the King, the subversion of the government, and Protestant religion. London, 1679.

(5) The Tryall of Richard Langhorn Esq; counsellor at law: for conspiring the death of the King, subversion of the government, and Protestant religion. London, 1679.

(6) The Tryals of Sir George Wakeman, barronet, William Marshall, William Rumley, and James Corker, Benedictine monks, for high treason, for conspiring the death of the King, subversion of the government, and Protestant religion. London, 1679.

(7) The Tryal of William, Viscount Stafford, for high treason, in conspiring the death of the King, the extirpation of the Protestant religion, the subversion of the government, and introduction of popery into this realm. London, 1680/1.

CASE 5 SPEECHES FROM THE SCAFFOLD

Although few people realized it at the time, Wakeman's acquittal was the beginning of the end. Confidence in Oates and his fellow informers had been shaken, though belief in the existence of a Popish Plot remained strong. The hysteria was dying down although Shaftesbury and the Green Ribbon Club endeavoured to keep it alive by staging huge pope-burning processions with the effigy of Sir Edmund Berry Godfrey taking a central position. The acquittal itself raised a great storm of protest and many virulent pamphlets were published, chiefly against Sir William Scroggs. (1) and (2) He was accused of having accepted bribes and the folly of the Portuguese ambassador in calling on Scroggs to thank him for his conduct of the case (3) did not help matters.

The publication of the speeches from the scaffold made by the condemned men just before they were executed, did much to dispel belief in the Plot. In an age where piety was of great interest, these speeches were avidly read. Not one of those accused admitted to any knowledge of the Popish Plot, not even when they were offered their lives in exchange for a confession. Nor, it may be added, did any of the many Catholic priests and laymen languishing in prison throughout the country. On the contrary, the five Jesuits (4) Richard Langhorne (5) and Lord Stafford, all died protesting their innocence. As time went on no further evidence was discovered against them but discreditable pieces of information about the informers became general knowledge. Attempts were made to rebut the effect of the dying speeches in the various "animadversions" which appeared against them. (6) and (7) The belief that Catholics could have a special dispensation from the Pope to lie in certain circumstances was commonly held:

> With them a simple lye is a venial sin,
> and they say a man may resolve to continue
> in venial sin till death, and yet be saved. (8)

People like Samuel Smith, Ordinary of Newgate, attempted to show that these men were not "real martyrs", (9) and would not even allow them the courage of their own convictions.

(1) Francis Smith, bookseller. Some observations upon the late tryals of Sir George Wakeman, Corker and Marshal, &c. By Tom. Tickle-foot the taborer, late clerk to Justice Clodpate. London, 1679.

(2) The Tickler tickled; or, The observator upon the late tryals of Sir George Wakeman, &c. observed: by Margery Mason, spinster. London, 1679.

(3) Francisco de Faria, b. 1653. The information of Francisco de Faria ... London, 1680.

(4) The Speeches of the five Jesuits that were executed at Tyburn on Friday the 20th. of this instant June 1679. [London, 1679]

(5) Richard Langhorne, 1654-1679. The speech of Richard Langhorn Esq; at his execution July 14, 1679. [London, 1679]

(6) The True speeches of Thomas Whitebread ... William Harcourt ... John Fenwick ... John Gavan, and Anthony Turner, all Jesvits and priests, before their execution at Tyburn, Jvne the 20th. MDCLXXIX. With animadversions thereupon: plainly discovering the fallacy of all their asseverations of their innocency. London, 1679.

(7) Animadversions on the Speech read by the late Lord Stafford, at the place of execution on Tower-Hill, plainly shewing the fallacy of all the asseverations of his innocency. By W.P., gent. London, 1681.

(8) Lying allowable with Papists to deceive Protestants ... [London, 1679?]

(9) Samuel Smith, Ordinary of Newgate. An account of the behaviour of the fourteen late popish malefactors, whil'st in Newgate ... Also a confvtation of their appeals, courage, and cheerfulness, at execution. London, 1679.

CASE 6 PLOTS WITHIN THE PLOT

There were various attempts throughout the Popish Plot period either to blame the Plot on the Protestants or to subvert the King's Evidence. The first of these occurred in February 1679 when Captain John Bury and Alderman William Brooks (1)

> both honest gentlemen and good Protestants; and such whose principles detested either to engage in, or conceal such abominable villany,

swore they had been approached by the papists "to turn this Plot to be a Protestant Plot for the destruction of the papists" and to invalidate the credit of Oates and Bedloe. This incident was kept secret and nothing came of it.

On April 24th 1679, Nathaniel Reading, a Protestant attorney, was tried and convicted for endeavouring to "stifle" the King's Evidence by offering Bedloe "fifty six peices of coyned gold of this Kingdom, called guyneys". In return Bedloe was to reduce his evidence against the Catholic peers so as to make it insufficient to convict them of high treason. It is possible that the charge against Reading was manufactured to silence him as a witness for the defence. As a friend and adviser to Lord Stafford in particular, he would have been in a position to testify on his behalf. However, Reading, "being convicted upon evidence, received judgement to be fined 1000 l., imprisoned for one year; and to be set in the pillory" (2) was thus disqualified as a future witness.

More serious for Titus Oates was an attempt to have him indicted for "the detestable sin of sodomy". The attack by Thomas Knox and John Lane, a dismissed servant of Oates, came soon after the acquittal of Sir George Wakeman, when Oates's veracity was already in question. However, Oates was triumphantly vindicated in the presence of several of the Opposition leaders including Shaftesbury, and the prisoners sentenced to fine and imprisonment. (3)

The third case, in January 1680, involved John Tasborough and Anne Price, who were accused of "endeavouring to perswade Mr. Stephen Dugdale to retract and deny his evidence about the horrid Popish Plot". (4) Dugdale's reputation was still intact and when Mrs. Price said that she had offered him a reward and the promise of the Duke of York's protection if he would retract his evidence against Whitbread, Harcourt and Fenwick,

he sued her and her accomplice, Tasborough, for libel. He won and the Duke of York's name was exonerated at the trial. Both defendants were heavily fined.

The most interesting of these plots within the Plot was the one that came to be known as the "Meal Tub Plot". This was an attempt by Elizabeth Cellier, "the Popish midwife", and Thomas Dangerfield, yet another unsavoury character, whom she had released from prison by paying his debts, to make it seem as if there were actually a "presbyterian" plot against the kingdom. They fabricated papers implicating Lord Shaftesbury and other Opposition leaders. These Dangerfield planted in the rooms of Roderick Mansell, (5) a leading Whig. Armed with a bogus search warrant, Dangerfield "found" them there himself. While waiting to show them to the Privy Councillors he was arrested on an old charge of counterfeiting. Untrustworthy in the extreme, he decided to try and save his skin by denouncing his present accomplices. Mrs. Cellier was arrested and further papers were discovered in her house in a meal-tub, from which this plot took its name. On October 31st 1679, Dangerfield "confessed" that it was actually a device on the part of leading Catholics such as the Countess of Powis, Lord Peterborough and the Earl of Castlemaine to take the pressure off the papists. It was in fact a "sham-plot" as Dangerfield called it himself, involving the Duke of York. (6) Dangerfield claimed he had been able to resist the bribe of £2000 offered him by Lord Arundell to murder the King but had assured Lord Powis that he was willing to kill Shaftesbury for a mere £500. (7) The whole affair fell rather flat although Dangerfield was duly released from prison and given a small pension. Both Mrs. Cellier (8) and the Earl of Castlemaine (9) were tried for high treason and both were acquitted when records of Dangerfield's crimes were produced by the defence.

(1) John Bury, Captain. A true narrative of the late design of the Papists to charge their horrid Plot upon the Protestants, by endeavouring to corrupt Captain Bvry and Alderman Brooks of Dublin, and to take off the evidence of Mr. Oats and Mr. Bedlow, &c. London, 1679.

(2) The Tryal of Nathaniel Reading, Esq; for attempting to stifle the Kings Evidence as to the horrid Plot. London, 1679.

(3) The Tryal and conviction of Thomas Knox and John Lane, for a conspiracy, to defame and scandalize Dr. Oates and Mr. Bedloe, thereby to discredit their evidence about the horrid Popish Plot. London, 1680.

(4) The Tryal and conviction of John Tasborovgh and Ann Price for subornation of perjury, in endeavouring to perswade M^{r}. Stephen Dugdale to retract and deny his evidence about the horrid Popish Plot: with an intention to stifle the further prosecution and discovery of the same. London, 16$\frac{79}{80}$.

(5) Roderick Mansell. An exact and true narrative of the late Popish intrigue, to form a plot, and then to cast the guilt and odium thereof upon the Protestants. London, 1680.

(6) Thomas Dangerfield, 1650?-1685. The information of Thomas Dangerfield, gent. London, 1680.

(7) Thomas Dangerfield. Mr. Tho. Dangerfeilds particular narrative of the late popish design to charge those of the Presbyterian party with a pretended conspiracy against His Majesties person, and government. London, 1679.

(8) Elizabeth Cellier. Malice defeated. London, 1680.

(9) The Tryal of Roger, Earl of Castlemaine, for high treason, in conspiring the death of the King, the subversion of the government, and introducing of popery and arbitrary power. London, 1681.

CASE 7 THE EXCLUSION CRISIS

The Popish Plot was played out against the struggle between the King and the House of Commons for control of the government. Throughout the Plot crisis the Whigs, led by Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, played on the fears of popery and agitated for the exclusion of James, Duke of York, from the throne as the only safeguard against it.

The first step in the Whig campaign was the impeachment of the Lord Treasurer, the Earl of Danby, who was accused, among other things, of concealing the Plot, raising an army to introduce "arbitrary government", and, worst of all, of corresponding with Louis XIV promising peace with France in return for a subsidy. (1) Charles saved him from trial by first proroguing and then dissolving Parliament. But Danby spent the next five years in the Tower.

For the first time, the elections for the new Parliament were fought along party lines, and, when it met on March 6th 1679, the Whigs were found to have swept the country. The King's speech at its opening stressed moderation and asked for "supplies". (2) As a sop, he sent the Duke of York into exile. It was to no avail. The House of Commons concerned itself only with the Plot and brought in a bill to disable James from inheriting the crown. After its second reading on May 21st the King decided again to prorogue Parliament as the only way to save his brother and eight weeks later dissolved it.

Of the two possible contenders for the throne - the illegitimate Duke of Monmouth, the King's eldest son, and the Prince of Orange, married to James's Protestant daughter, Mary - Shaftesbury made a tactical error by choosing to support the former. Popular, but weak in character, Monmouth could be easily influenced, but the fact of his bastardy stuck in many throats. Charles himself was willing to put limitations upon the power of James but was utterly opposed to changing the succession. Mysterious tales of documents

in a certain "black box" (3) supposedly proving that Charles had actually married Monmouth's mother, induced the King to make a solemn declaration that he had married no one but Catherine.

Fears of what would happen should the King die were intensified by two short but severe illnesses. The new Parliament met on October 21st 1680. Feelings ran as high as ever, although both James and Monmouth were now exiled, and on November 4th an exclusion bill was again introduced. (4) Violent debates followed and the bill (5) was passed on November 11th only to be thrown out by the Lords after a six hour debate, by 63 votes to 30, chiefly due to the eloquence of Lord Halifax. The fury of the Commons knew no bounds and in the midst of the uproar the King dissolved Parliament and appointed a new one to meet at Oxford the following March safely away from the emotions of London. Meanwhile Whig pamphleteers stressed the horrors that could be expected under a Popish King. (6)

The fifth and last Parliament of the reign opened at Oxford on March 21st 1681. (7) As the Commons issued an ultimatum to the King - exclusion or civil war - Charles turned the tables upon them. After a life of one week he caught them by surprise and dissolved Parliament (8) having been rendered independent of it by the conclusion of a treaty with Louis XIV in which, in return for subsidies, he agreed not to ally himself with Spain against France.

(1) and (5) An Impartial account of divers remarkable proceedings the last sessions of Parliament relating to the horrid Popish Plot, &c. London, 1679. 2 editions.

(2) Great Britain. Sovereigns, etc., 1660-1685 (Charles II) His Majesties most gracious speech ... to both Houses of Parliament, on Thursday the 6th of March 167$\frac{8}{9}$. London, 167$\frac{8}{9}$.

(3) The Interest of the three kingdom's, with respect to the business of the black box, and all the other pretentions of his Grace the Duke of Monmouth, discuss'd and asserted. 2d impression. London, 1680.

(4) Great Britain. Parliament, 1680. House of Commons. An exact collection of the most considerable debates in the Honourable House of Commons at the Parliament held at Westminster the one and twentieth of October, 1680. London, 1681.

(6) A group of three pamphlets concerning the succession: A Letter from a gentleman of quality in the country, to his friend ... being an argument relating to the point of succession to the crown ... [London] 1679. A Letter from a gentleman in the city, to one in the covntry; concerning the bill for disabling the Duke of York to inherit the imperial crown of this realm. London, 1680. [Elkanah Settle] 1648-1724. The character of a popish successour, and what England may expect from such a one. London, 1681.

(7) Great Britain. Sovereigns, etc., 1660-1685 (Charles II) His Majesties most gracious speech to both Houses of Parliament, at the opening of the Parliament at Oxford, Monday the 21st of March, 168$\frac{0}{1}$. London, 168$\frac{0}{1}$.

(8) Great Britain. Parliament, 1681. House of Commons. The Proceedings of the Honourable House of Commons, who met at Oxford, March 21, 168$\frac{0}{1}$, and were dissolved the 28th. of the same moneth. London, 1681.

CASE 8 SIR ROGER L'ESTRANGE AND THE END OF THE PLOT

Apart from the King, one man seemed unaffected by the hysteria raised over the Popish Plot. The tireless and clever pen of Sir Roger L'Estrange, that most influential of Tory pamphleteers, began to cast doubt on the Plot's reality during the storm over the acquittal of Sir George Wakeman. His first effort (1) was so cautious in fact, that both sides mistook his intentions. As time went on he pointed out more and more openly the inconsistencies and absurdities of Oates's information. Bitterly attacked in return by such people as Henry Care, (2) a rabid Whig and believer in the Plot, he turned to satire and in a re-presentation of 1641 he showed how applicable were the uncertainties at the start of the civil war to the present 1679-1680:

> First, make the People sure; and That must be
> By Pleas for Conscience, Common Liberty ...
> In the mean while, the Pulpits and the Presses
> Must ring of Popery, Grievances, Addresses,
> Plots of all Sorts, Invasions, Massacres ... (3)

He continued by attacking the Whigs for their advocacy of the Plot in an attempt to overthrow the government and the monarchy. (4)

L'Estrange, naturally, was not allowed to get away with this. Accused of himself being a Catholic by such men as Miles Prance (5) he was forced for a short time into exile.

Two last trials connected with the Popish Plot took place in 1681 and formed part of the King's counter-attack against the Whig Opposition. The climate which made them possible was in part created by the efforts of L'Estrange in discrediting Oates and his fellow informers. Edward Fitz-Harris was an Irishman and either he or an accomplice, Everard, had written a libel which incited rebellion against the King if he refused the demands for James's exclusion during the Oxford Parliament. The intention seemed to be that the Catholics should be accused of hiring Fitz-Harris to write the libel and of then sending copies to the Opposition leaders so that when found in their possession they could be tried for high treason. Titus Oates gave evidence for the defence to the truth of this. (6) Fitz-Harris tried to defend himself with the plea that he was in the pay of the court party:

> I hope what I did was with a designe to serve the King in discovering what was designed against him, according as I was employed.

The jury, however, found him guilty and he was executed at Tyburn on July 1st 1681. With him to the scaffold went the last victim of the Popish Plot, Archbishop Oliver Plunket, condemned for his supposed complicity in the Irish part of the Plot.

On August 17th, the Whigs, scattered and dishonoured after the Oxford Parliament, faced a last blow when Stephen College, the "Protestant joiner", and one of their followers, was arraigned for high treason at Oxford. He was charged with having conspired to seize the person of the King during the Oxford Parliament and to raise a rebellion. The King's Evidence made a final appearance en masse but with a notable difference: Oates appeared for the defence, Dugdale, Turbervill and others for the prosecution. The defence was very weak and not even the evidence of Oates helped College. Indeed this trial was chiefly remarkable for the falling out of the former associates; said Turbervill at one point:

> I always looked upon Dr. Oates as a very ill man, and never would converse much with him. (7)

The verdict of guilty was received by the loyal citizens of Oxford with great applause and College was executed on the last day of August. A week later, Oates's allowance from the King came to an end. In 1685 he was tried for perjury, convicted and sentenced, among other things, to be flogged from Aldgate to Newgate, and two days later, from Newgate to Tyburn. This savage sentence was duly carried out.

The Whig party was left in disarray. Its leader, the Earl of Shaftesbury, narrowly escaped execution for treason and fled to Holland where he died in 1683.

The real victor was Charles the Second. At his death in 1685 he bequeathed to his brother a loyal, prosperous and united kingdom. Within three years James had thrown it all away.

(1) Sir Roger L'Estrange, 1616-1704. The history of the Plot. London, 1679.

(2) [Henry Care] 1646-1688. The history of the damnable Popish Plot, in its various branches & progress. London, 1680.

(3) [Sir Roger L'Estrange] The committee; or, Popery in masquerade. London, 1680.

(4) Sir Roger L'Estrange. Lestrange's Narrative of the Plot. London, 1680.

(5) Miles Prance. L'Estrange a papist. London, 1681.

(6) The Tryal and condemnation of Edw. Fitz-Harris, Esq; for high-treason. London, 1681.

(7) The Arraignment, tryal and condemnation of Stephen Colledge for high-treason, in conspiring the death of the King, the levying of war, and the subversion of the government. London, 1681.

Anne Jocz

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